

“The Almost Eve of Adventure”

Text: Matthew 22:34-40; Ephesians 1:15-22; Luke 1:38

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A surge of adrenaline distracts me every time a jet flies overhead these recent days. All it takes is a distant roar through the clouds! I look to the sky as a preoccupied wondering rises. I think thoughts that start like this: “Eight days and we’re on our way . . .” or, “A week from Tuesday we’ll be in Jericho . . .” or, “It won’t be long now . . .”

Indeed! A dozen of us are about to embark to Israel and Palestine – the Holy Lands of which we have heard so much. And on the almost-eve of this adventure I simply want to make some suggestions for my traveling companions. Having visited that region of the world I am sure that these hints will be helpful. But please, feel not left out - because these clues are important for all of us every day. They apply not only to our traveling entourage, but to every soul who ever embarks on the journey we call faith.

A first thing to be sure to pack. Along with a rain jacket, and extra socks, and some good walking shoes . . . make sure to bring along **the eyes of your heart**. That’s a phrase from Saint Paul who wrote to the early church at Ephesus about the importance of “having the eyes of their hearts enlightened.” What a wonderful image: the eyes of your heart!

Marcus Borg says that one of the most important tasks for the church in the 21st century is to provide a safe place for the hatching of the human heart.¹ Actually, by various chain of academic borrowing, Borg took the phrase from Alan Jones who took it from Frederick Buechner!² And such hatching is all about encouraging the realms of the spirit to take root in our hearts and grow. It’s to soften the spectrum of hardness that we have collected over the years long enough to know that there is way more to this mystery of life than we can ever grasp.

Fred Craddock is a retired homiletics professor and he was once traveling with a group of professors in the Holy Land. They made a visit to the Upper Room but there was a tour group ahead of them and so they had to wait their turn. As they did Craddock and one of his companions listened to the guide leading the other group. He said: “Just look around! We are in the actual room where Jesus took the bread and the cup and said, ‘This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.’” And then, with deep conviction, he went on to recount the Last Supper of Jesus. The scholars then took their turn and their guide began: “As you can tell by the design, this room did not exist at the time of Christ. It is Byzantine in architecture and is probably only a thousand years old.” He went on with encyclopedic facticity but with no sense of awe or wonder. And Craddock turned to his companion and said, “Come on, let’s go travel with that other group!”³ (355)

A second thing for your journey. Along with Pepto-Bismol, and a fresh journal, and your e-ticket . . . take along **the rigors of your best mind**. Make the journey willing to ask the hard questions that faith should rightly demand – especially in the pluralistic world in which we live. Moses put it so clearly: “Love the Lord your God with heart and soul and *mind* and strength!” Jesus said that, too. And so did Paul.

I have always appreciated the by-line on the front cover of Christian Century magazine – a journal to which I subscribe. Although the design and layout have changed a good bit over the years these words have always been there: “Thinking critically, living faithfully.” And that’s exactly right. Thinking critically, and, as the old commercial drilled into us, a good mind is a terrible thing to waste!

I have a friend who asked me about our upcoming trip. He’s full of goodness and light: intelligent, likable, and fun to be with. He listened to all that I had to say about holding text and context side by side, and being confronted by the clash of antiquity and post-modernity, and seeing the challenge of being a Christian in a multi-faith world. I told him about the growing need to understand the three Abrahamic who claim some hold on the places that we will visit. When I was done he said: “I wouldn’t want to take a journey like that. It might change the way that I think about things, and then what would I do?”

“Be transformed by the renewal of your minds,” said Paul. That’s so important! Or Leslie Weatherhead who reflected on his own trip to the Holy Land: “No belief is worth keeping unless it can bear the touch of reality!” And so, whether you journey in West Hartford or in Galilee, keep your best mind with you.

And then third. Along with a good stash of money . . . and your passport . . . bring along **the trust of your soul.** More particularly, especially so close to Christmas, bring along Mary’s willingness to say, “Let it be in me according to God’s word.”

“Let it be!” That’s not the Beatles! That’s Mary! Mary who saw with the eyes of her heart, and kept the best of her mind opened, and knew that with all of it she needed to surrender to God in trust. Because any of us on any journey of faith to any land on the planet can take it all in and balance what we can but unless there is also a letting go in trust there is little growing in the soul.

I’m sure you have heard some version of the story about the man who fell over the side of a cliff. In his panic he grabbed for whatever he might hold onto, and there he was, dangling far above the rocky ground holding on to a single branch. He was not often one for prayer, but this was one of those desperate times and so he said, “God if you exist and if you can hear me please get me out of this!” And a voice spoke back, “Just let go, I’ll catch you.” And the man said, “But look at those rocks below!” And God said, “Let go, you can trust me.” And the man looked back down at the rocks, and he looked up to God. And he looked down at the rocks, and up to God. And then he spoke one more time, “Is there anybody else up there I can talk to?”

Contrived, for sure, but absolutely true in the telling! Sometimes in life we open the eyes of our hearts and we bring the best of our minds, but then hold back on our surrender into God’s leading and care. But letting go in trust is essential to growing the soul.

Enough! It’s almost time! A week from tomorrow we embark. Late in the afternoon we board a bus here at the church. About six hours later we’ll board a wide-body aircraft at Newark Airport. And then, barring no delays, an hour or so before midnight those mighty engines will send us down the tarmac and our wings will carry us almost a third of the way around the globe.

We take each of you with us in heart as you continue to journey here. Please keep each of us in your prayers as we make our journey there. And, please, look forward to the stories that we'll come back to tell! In the name of the One who invites us all to be on the way. Amen.

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¹ Marcus Borg. The Heart of Christianity. HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, pp. 151-155.

² Ibid., p. 163.

³ Richard W. Thomas. "Leaping a Crevasse of Doubt" in The Christian Ministry, January 1996, pp. 36 ff.